DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 474 522 PS 031 128

AUTHOR	Epstein, Ann S.
TITLE	Helping Your Preschool Child Become a Reader: Ideas for Parents.
INSTITUTION	High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, Ypsilanti, MI.
ISBN	ISBN-1-57379-126-1
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	49p.
AVAILABLE FROM	High/Scope Press, High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 600 North River Street, Ypsilanti, MI 48198-2898 ($4.95). Tel: 800-40-PRESS (Toll Free); Fax: 800-442-4FAX (Toll Free); e-mail: press@highscope.org; Web site: http://www.highscope.org.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS
DESCRIPTORS	Books; Childrens Literature; Early Experience; *Emergent Literacy; *Parent Child Relationship; Parent Materials; Parent Role; *Parents as Teachers; *Preschool Children; Reading Instruction; Reading Material Selection
IDENTIFIERS	High Scope Model

ABSTRACT

Noting that the roots of reading and writing begin long before children enter school and that parents set the stage for the development of reading and writing skills, this booklet explains the ways children read and write in their early years and what parents can do to support their child's learning. Based on the High/Scope preschool key experiences in language and literacy, the booklet begins with a description of young children's early reading and writing efforts and parents' role as their child's first teacher. Suggested activities for parents and children built around their everyday interactions and activities relate to the following: (1) have daily conversations with your child; (2) keep lots of printed materials and writing materials in your home; (3) set up a reading and writing space for your child; (4) let your child see you read and write; (5) read with your child every day; (6) call your child's attention to reading and writing in everyday activities; (7) make a message board; (8) encourage your child to "read"; (9) display your child's writing; (10) make a bank or file of words your child likes to write; (11) go to the library with your child; and (12) use television and technology wisely. The booklet includes a list of sample reading and writing materials for young children. Also provided are tips for selecting storybooks and reading with children. The booklet concludes by reiterating that parents can help their children become skillful and appreciative readers if they remember that reading begins with language and that reading continues with print. (KB)

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Helping Your Preschool Child Become a Reader

Ideas for Parents

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Ann S. Epstein, Ph.D.

High/Scope Educational Research Foundation

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Endorsed by the
High/Scope
Early Childhood Reading Institute

HIGH/SCOPE® PRESS

Ypsilanti, Michigan

Published by
High/Scope® Press
A division of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation
600 North River Street
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198-2898
(734)485-2000, fax (734)485-0704
press@highscope.org

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Editor: Holly Barton

Cover design, text design, and production:
Margaret FitzGerald, Metaphor Marketing Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Epstein, Ann S.
Helping your preschool child become a reader : ideas for parents / Ann S. Epstein.
p. cm.
ISBN 1-57379-126-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Reading (Preschool) 2. Reading--Parent participation. I. Title.
LB1140.5.R4 E67 2002
372.4--dc21

2002007431

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A Message to Parents

From the High/Scope Early Childhood Reading Institute

Learning to read and write begins at birth. Children learn to read and write because they are natural communicators. They want to share needs, feelings, and ideas with family members, teachers, and friends.

To help your preschool child become a reader and writer, provide your child with these two things:

Experiences with language

Listen to and talk with your child.
Play games with language and sounds.

Experiences with print

Read to your child.
Give your child tools for reading and writing.

Research shows that the roots of reading and writing begin long before children enter school. As a parent, you will set the stage for the development of these skills. This booklet explains all the ways your child will read and write in the early years and what you can do to support your child's learning.

Enjoy your child's journey to literacy!

How Young Children Read and Write

Young children read in many ways. They begin by recognizing familiar drawings and symbols. For example, they know the meaning of a traffic signal, a store sign, or the illustration on a cereal box. They pretend-read a favorite book by describing the pictures or reciting parts of the story from memory. In these ways, children show that they understand the idea of print and know that it is used to communicate.

Later, children grasp the idea of letters. They learn that letters stand for sounds and that letters make up words. They see that written words stand for spoken words. This understanding comes about when children have many experiences that link spoken and written language, such as being read to and having their thoughts written down by an adult.

Young children also write in many ways. As the muscles in their fingers develop, they draw and write with crayons, markers, paints, and many other materials. They make scribbles and then draw pictures. Later, they make scribbles that look like letters.

Eventually children write real letters, often beginning with the letters in their first name. As children learn more letters and their sounds, they try to spell or sound out words. They write words based on the sounds they can hear in the words *(bg)* and eventually learn conventional spelling *(big)*.

The more young children have these experiences, the better prepared they are to learn in elementary school. In fact, early experiences with reading and writing lay the foundation for lifelong learning.

Why Parents Are Important

As a parent or guardian, you are your child's first teacher. There are many things you can do to give your child a solid and enjoyable educational beginning.

Here are some general points to remember:

- Helping children become readers and writers does not mean drilling them or making them recite memorized lists. Learning to read and write should be pleasurable, not tedious. You can help your child develop a good attitude toward learning as he or she masters valuable skills.

- Literacy comes from a wide variety of language experiences—speaking, listening, reading, and writing. (See "High/Scope Preschool Key Experiences in Language and Literacy.") By exploring the sounds of language in many different ways, you will help your child make the connection between speech and print.

- Early reading and writing experiences will be meaningful and lasting if they build on children's natural desire to communicate with the people close to them and to learn about the world around them.

- Young children need lots of experiences using language in their play and daily routines, and they need repeated exposure to the written word.

High/Scope Preschool Key Experiences in Language and Literacy

Speaking and Listening

- Talking with others about personally meaningful experiences
- Describing objects, events, and relations
- Having fun with language: listening to stories and poems, making up stories and rhymes

Reading and Writing

- Reading in various ways: reading storybooks, signs and symbols, one's own writing
- Writing in various ways: drawing, scribbling, letter-like forms, writing words based on word sounds, conventional forms
- Dictating stories

However, they do not need formal lessons. There are many things you can do as a parent to include reading and writing in everyday interactions and activities.

What Parents Can Do

1 Have daily conversations with your child.

- Talk with your child every day. Speaking and listening lay the foundation for reading and writing.

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- When you have a conversation with your child, take turns listening and talking. Remember, conversation means *two-way* communication.

- Be patient and listen to what your child has to say even if you have to wait for your child to form the

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words and ideas. Your patience will help your child feel free to talk.

- Personalize your conversations. Children like to talk about themselves, their interests, and their feelings. If you talk about things that your child cares about, and listen as he or she talks, your child will be an eager, natural speaker.

- Do things together that naturally encourage conversation.

  Example: Look at pictures in the family photo album. Talk about the people and celebrations.

  Example: Join your child's pretend play. Let your child be the leader.

  Example: Provide materials and share in your child's favorite activities, such as drawing, building with blocks, racing toy cars, or baking cookies.

  Example: Attend sporting events, go for walks, dig in the yard, make a snow fort, or collect bugs.

- Help the conversation along by making encouraging comments ("I see you made a red circle") and

repeating your child's remarks ("You're happy because Kyla invited you to her party").

- Ask questions from time to time. Remember that too many questions tend to stifle conversation. An occasional open-ended question is fine, especially to seek information that you do not already know.

  Example: "How did you make that tower?"

  Example: "What are you going to serve at your 'tea party'?"

- Enjoy language. You can build your child's knowledge of the sounds that go with each letter through enjoyable activities (see examples below). Besides, having fun with language is a sure way to engage your child's interest in learning!

- Sing songs, tell stories, recite rhymes, and move to rhythmic chants. When you do these things, you are helping your child develop what reading experts call *phonological awareness*. It means knowing the sounds of language.

  Example: Nursery rhymes like "The Eensy, Weensy Spider" are filled with the sounds and rhymes of

language *(eensy* and *weensy, spout* and *out).*

Example: Music is another way to introduce your child to word sounds. Repeated words and simple rhymes in familiar songs like "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" help make children aware of the sounds that make up these words.

Example: Make up new songs to familiar tunes. For instance, sing "We're going to the playground" to "Did You Ever See a Lassie." Let your child make up new words to match what you are doing.

Example: Change a word in a familiar rhyme or song and ask your child to supply a new ending that rhymes. "Jack be nimble, Jack be red, Jack jump over the _____." Fill in one or two examples your-

self, then give your child a turn. If your child makes up a nonsense word that rhymes ("Jack be silly, Jack jump over the nilly"), accept the answer and laugh with your child. It shows your child understands rhyming.

- Point out the individual sounds in words. This promotes what reading experts call *phonemic awareness.* A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in the language. It can be the sound made by a single letter, such as /s/, or a letter combination, such as /sh/. Phonemic awareness is knowing that words are made up of sequences of these individual sounds. Phonics, the next step in learning to read, is knowing sound-letter relationships.

  Example: You might say *"Mommy* and *muffin.* Those both start with the *mmm* sound, that's the letter *m."* Or, emphasize the /b/ sound when you say *"B*ecca is putting *b*utter on her *b*agel." (When you say the sound of a letter, such as /b/, avoid adding the "uh" sound after it ["buh"].)

  Example: Your child is labeling a drawing and asks you how to spell *dog.* You say "It begins with a /d/

sound. Can you make the letter with that sound?" Or, say "It starts with the sound /d/, and the letter *d* looks like this." Your child can then copy or trace the letter while learning its sound.

Example: Play games with alliteration, that is, with words that start with the same sound. Emphasize the /s/ sound in "You drew a *s*uper *s*illy *s*un." Or, put three objects that start with the /b/ sound in a bag (such as a ball, block, and barrette), and ask your child to find something else that begins with *b* to put in the bag. Guessing games are also fun. "I'm thinking of something in the refrigerator that starts with the /g/ sound—gggg. What do you think it is?" You and your child can take turns with games like these.

What did your child like about the activities in #1?

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Keep lots of printed materials and writing materials in your home.

- Make sure your home is filled with interesting things to read, including books, magazines, photo albums, newspapers, catalogs, seed packets, greeting cards, flyers, manuals, and maps. Children, like adults, need variety. (See "Reading Materials at Home for Young Children.")

- Keep many different types of writing materials in your home, including crayons, markers, chalk, pens and pencils, paper in different sizes and colors, stationery, stamps and ink pads, wooden and plastic letters for tracing and copying. Tools for making books, such as tape, scissors, staplers, hole punch, and string will also encourage writing. (See "Writing Materials at Home for Young Children.")

- Keep reading and writing materials where your child can easily see and reach them. For example, put them on low shelves or in baskets and crates.

- Reuse materials that would otherwise be recycled, such as newspapers, catalogs, greeting cards, junk

Reading Materials at Home for Young Children

- Illustrated storybooks
- Nonfiction books (about animals, vehicles, places, etc.)
- Poetry books
- Homemade books
- Child-made books
- Photo albums
- Magazines (for children and adults)
- Catalogs
- Newspapers
- Telephone books
- Travel brochures
- Junk mail
- Magnetic letters
- Wooden and cardboard letters (for tracing)
- Alphabet puzzles
- Empty food boxes and cans with labels (cleaned and with any sharp edges smoothed)
- Store coupons
- Takeout menus
- Calendars
- Greeting cards
- Ticket stubs
- Business cards
- Empty seed packets
- Tree and bird guides

Writing Materials at Home for Young Children

- Regular and colored pencils
- Pens
- Crayons
- Colored markers
- Chalk (white and colored) and chalkboards
- Unlined paper
- Ruled notebooks
- Stationery and envelopes
- Note pads
- Sticky notes
- Used gift-wrap
- Wallpaper samples
- Colored construction paper
- Grocery bags
- Canceled postage stamps
- Checkbook registers
- Ink pads and stamps
- Order forms
- Stickers
- Age-appropriate drawing and writing programs for the computer
- Tape, staplers, yarn, and hole punch (so children can make their own books)

mail, flyers, and unused store coupons. Look for used children's books at yard sales, resale shops, and used-book sales at libraries. Reading and writing materials do not need to be expensive.

- Add your own printing around the house. For example, make labels for things your child uses every day ("toy box" or "dishes"), and put the labels at your child's eye level.

- If family members and friends ask what to buy for birthdays and holidays, suggest reading and writing materials you know your child will enjoy.

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What did your child like about the activities in #2?

Set up a reading and writing space for your child.

- Look for a special space in a quiet area of your home or close to the center of action. Decide what will be most inviting for your child and will keep his or her attention.

- Include reading and writing materials that your child does not have to share with adults or other children in the household.

- Encourage your child to think of this area as his or her own play or work space.

- Offer your child the choice of spending quiet time in this special area instead of taking a nap. Or, set

aside another regular time each day when your child can choose to go to this area.

What did your child like about the activities in #3?

22

Let your child see you read and write.

- Model reading and writing at home. Young children want to imitate their parents.

- Pick up the newspaper or a book rather than turn on the television. You will send your child a powerful message about the pleasure as well as the usefulness of reading.

- Comment out loud when you read a label or a set of instructions. Your children will see that reading provides useful information.

- When your child or someone else in the family wants to know something, say "Let's look that up in the dictionary [or in the encyclopedia or on the Internet]." Let your child see you turn to written sources for information. Make an adventure out of looking things up.

- At dinner, mention that you just read an interesting article in a magazine or the newspaper, and share what you learned in a sentence or two.

- Write in your child's presence. Let your child see you write letters, make shopping lists, pay bills, and type notes on the computer.

- Talk about how you use reading and writing in your job. If possible, let your child accompany you to work and see how reading and writing are a daily part of your job.

What did your child like about the activities in #4?

5 Read with your child every day.

- Make reading a daily pleasure. Reading should be relaxing and fun, not a chore or an assignment.

- Make sure there are many books to choose from. (See "Selecting Storybooks for Young Children" to help you choose books to buy or take out from the library.)

- Let your child choose the books you will read. Don't be surprised if your child chooses the same books over and over. Repetition

Selecting Storybooks For Young Children

Here are some questions to ask yourself when choosing storybooks for your child:

1. **Illustrations.** Are the drawings, paintings, or photographs visually pleasing? If there are people shown in the pictures, do they represent a variety of races, ages, and physical abilities? What are the people doing? Are the activities and messages depicted meaningful to my child?

2. **Story line.** Will it make sense to my child? Is it interesting enough to encourage my child to discuss it? Is it written in the language my child speaks?

3. **Child interest.** Will the subject of the book be of interest to my child? Will it make my child laugh, cry, or feel curious about the characters and what happens to them? Is it a book my child will look at alone, when I am not available for reading?

4. **Adult interest.** Do the story and characters interest me? Is it a book I want to read and talk about with my child? Do I want my child to see and hear the messages in the book? Am I prepared to answer whatever questions my child may have about the book?

will help your child begin to recognize familiar words and letters.

- Set aside a regular time to read each day. This might be at bedtime, after school, early in the morning—whatever works in your family's schedule.

- Choose a comfortable place to read without a lot of distractions. Snuggle or sit side by side on a couch, bed, rocking chair; on pillows; at the kitchen table; in a tent in the basement; or in a backyard hammock.

- Make sure your child can see and touch the book while you read.

- If it's a new book, read it yourself beforehand so you feel comfortable with its contents and have a sense of where you or your child might pause to talk about what you are reading.

- Remember to read with interest and expression. Show your pleasure in this shared activity. (See "How to Read With Your Child.")

How to Read With Your Child

1. **Read slowly and naturally.** Pronounce the words carefully.
2. **Read with interest.** Make your voice expressive. If you are interested, your child will be, too.
3. **Use different voices.** Give different voices or other qualities to the different characters in the story. Let your child come up with different voices.
4. **Follow the words with your finger.** This shows your child that spoken words can be represented as written words. Your child will learn to associate the sounds of speech with specific letters and letter combinations.
5. **Stop reading to talk about the pictures, story, and characters.** Answer your child's questions. Ask your child to predict what will happen or to imagine different events and endings for the book.
6. **Extend the reading.** Give your child drawing materials to illustrate events or characters in the book. Encourage your child to act out parts of the book or do things the way a character might. Visit places and do things that appear in the book. Make up stories and play games that build on the book's ideas.

What did your child like about the activities in #5?

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Call your child's attention to reading and writing in everyday activities.

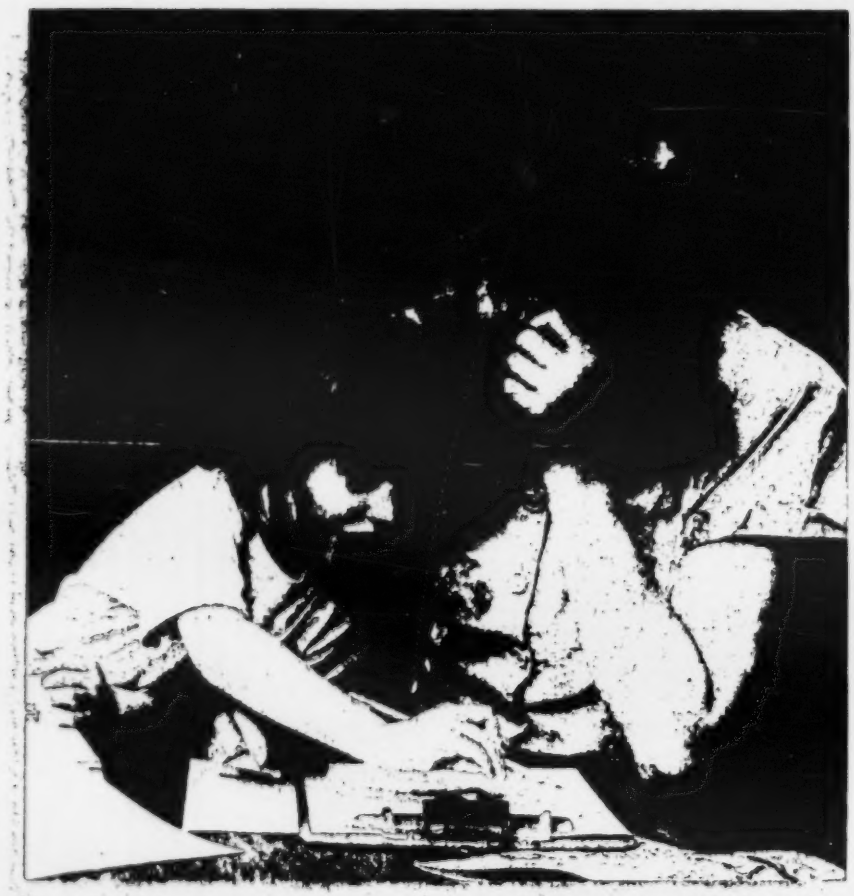
- Involve your child in making grocery lists and finding matching coupons. Let your child think of items for the "to do" list, help write notes and reminders, and so on.

- While riding in the car or on public transportation, point out letters and words on road signs, buildings, license plates, the sides of trucks, bus headings, and car models.

- Take walks with your child to look at street signs, house numbers, store names, apartment directories, and so on. Ask your child to find familiar letters, for example, those in his or her first name.

- Look up telephone numbers and addresses. Write them down and refer to them when you go to those places.

- Read maps before you go places. Find the names of the beginning and ending streets and landmarks in between, and trace or highlight the route.



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- Read the team names and scores at sporting events.

- Read the daily weather report in the newspaper. Match weather symbols and pictures with words.

- Read menus at restaurants. Make up menus for meals at home.

- Write and illustrate recipes for your child's favorite foods, for example, the ingredients in your child's favorite sandwich or the toppings on your child's favorite pizza.

- Label the pictures in the family photo albums. When you are putting pictures in the album (for example, after a vacation or birthday party), ask your child to suggest a short caption to put under the pictures. If your child is beginning to write, encourage your child to write all or part of the caption.

- Write thank-you notes and letters. Leave notes and reminders for each other, other members of the family, and caregivers.

- Read the television guide together. List the shows to watch, along with their days and times. After

watching a show, encourage your child to draw and write about the story, setting, and characters.

- Help your child write, illustrate, and mail fan letters to your child's favorite performers or athletes. Your child will most likely receive a letter and photo in return.

What did your child like about the activities in #6?

7 Make a message board.

- Make a message board to let your children know the plans for the day. This is especially helpful on weekends, when the routine may change.

- Hang the board at your child's eye level, for example, on the bottom half of the refrigerator. That way your child can see it, point to it, and add his or her own messages.

- Use a dry-erase board, chalk board, or just a pad of paper. Each day, draw a few simple pictures and label them with easy words.

  Example: Suppose you are going to the playground and then grocery shopping. Draw and label a picture of a swing on one line, then put a picture of a grocery cart with the word *store* on the next line.

- Encourage your child to use the pictures and words to predict what will happen that day. At the same time you are helping your child learn to read, you are also promoting learning about sequences, an important concept in math.

What did your child like about the activities in #7?

33

8 Encourage your child to "read."

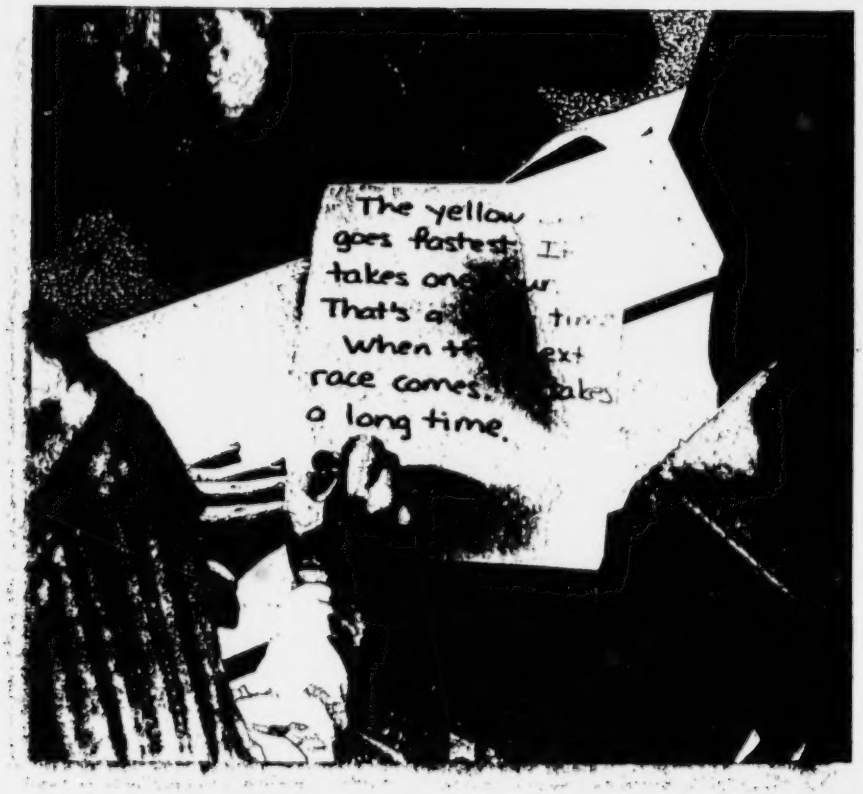
- Enjoy all the ways your child tries out reading. Before they read actual words, children like to pretend to read. They follow the pictures in a familiar book, tell the story from memory, or make up their own narrative.

- Let your child "read" books to you. It shows your child understands basic concepts about books, such as turning pages from front to back, reading from top to bottom, and following lines from left to right.

- Encourage your child to read to others, including willing siblings, other family members, friends, even your child's dolls and stuffed animals.

- As your child begins to write, encourage him or her to read the words back to you.

  Example: Encourage your child to write a story about a picture he or she has drawn or seen in a



magazine. It might be something fun, such as a birthday party or a visit with cousins. Or, it could be something your child is anxious about, such as a trip to the doctor or the arrival of a new sibling. The words your child writes and reads back to you will help you understand your child's feelings.

- If your child asks you to write down a story or label a picture, read the words back exactly as your child said them. Avoid the temptation to correct your child's words. Reading the exact words back is how

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you help your child make the connection between spoken and written language.

- Encourage your child to do his or her own writing, in whatever form, and read it back to you. Your child will come to think of himself or herself as a writer and a reader. Your child may need lots of encouragement to do this; many young children are hesitant to try something they know they can't do like adults do. Accept all your child's efforts.

What did your child like about the activities in #8?

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Display your child's writing.

- Display your child's writing in all its forms, including scribble letters and words based on word sounds. It shows that you value and support your child's efforts.

- Take photos of temporary writing, such as writing with sticks in the mud or with sand on a tray, and display the photos.

- Tape, pin, or clip the writing on surfaces that your child and other family members can easily see. These include the refrigerator, a wall, a bulletin board, a bookcase, the side of a dresser, and the front of a kitchen cabinet. Also, attach sticky notes to the computer, hang papers from a mobile, and so on.

- Post the writing at your child's eye level so your child can see and appreciate his or her own efforts.

What did your child like about the activities in #9?

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10 Make a bank or file of words your child likes to write.

- Organize the words your child is learning to write. A word bank is an illustrated dictionary of words your child uses in talking, reading, and writing. These are the words that are important to your child. The word bank grows as your child becomes interested in reading and writing more words.

- Create a word bank with an old recipe box and index cards, or with a loose-leaf notebook. Put each word on a separate card or page. Whenever your child asks how to write or spell a word, print it in large clear letters. Next to the written word, you or your child can draw a picture or paste a photo that illustrates the word.

- Place the cards or pages in alphabetical order.

- Keep the word bank in a place where your child can easily reach it. Now your child can look up words on his or her own.

- If your child asks you to write or spell a word, refer

your child to the word bank. If it is a new word, add it to the word bank.

What did your child like about the activities in #10?

40

Go to the library with your child.

- Find the public library nearest to you. Some libraries send bookmobiles into residential neighborhoods. Your child's preschool or day care center may also have a lending library for children and family members. Libraries are a wonderful place to get books and other reading materials, usually at no cost.

- Visit the library with your child as often as your schedule permits. Try to make it a regular event, for example, every Monday after school or every other Saturday after soccer practice.

- Get your child his or her own library card.

- Buy or make a tote bag so your child can have his or her own place to store and carry books. Let your child choose or decorate the bag.

- Check out books, children's magazines, cassette tapes, and CDs with stories, information, poems, and songs.

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- Let your child check out items that interest him or her. You can point out something you think your child would find interesting, but accept your child's choices.

- Let your child judge if a book is too easy or too hard. Reading and re-reading easy books can build your child's confidence, and if a difficult book is interesting enough, your child may be up to the challenge of reading it. If a book is boring or *too* difficult to understand, your child will simply set it aside and pick up something more interesting.

- While you are at the library, pick up a schedule of upcoming events. Many libraries have regular story hours and other special events for young children.

- Sometimes there are exhibits at the library, for example, an art show by a local artist. Looking at the exhibit together and talking about it is another good way to develop your child's language skills.

What did your child like about the activities in #11?

44

12 Use television and technology wisely.

- Keep the focus on active learning. Young children learn by doing, not by watching. Television and computers can play a part in early learning but should not replace your child's active exploration and shared activities with you.

- Limit your child's viewing to one or two television programs per day. Look for shows, such as those broadcast on public television, that help young children develop the intellectual and social skills they

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need when they enter school. Watch these programs with your child and talk about what you see.

- If you have a computer, choose software designed for young children. Look for drawing and writing programs that allow children to create and read their own pictures, words, and stories. These are more interesting and promote a wider range of skills than programs limited to memorization and practice.

What did your child like about the activities in #12?

Closing

As with every area of learning, you are your child's first teacher. You can help your child become a skillful and appreciative reader if you remember two things:

Reading begins with language: Talking with your child is the first step in reading.

Reading continues with print: Introduce your child to written words in many forms.

With your encouragement, your child will enter school ready to learn how to read and write. With your example, your child will become an adult who reads for information and pleasure.

Here's a final word of encouragement: Remember you are not alone. Talk to your child's teacher, the librarian, and other parents. Get their ideas on how you can support your child's learning at home. Share with them the books and activities that your family enjoys. Make learning to read a community project!

12 Things Parents Can Do to Help Their Preschool Child Become a Reader

1. Have daily conversations with your child.
2. Keep lots of printed materials and writing materials in your home.
3. Set up a reading and writing space for your child.
4. Let your child see you read and write.
5. Read with your child every day.
6. Call your child's attention to reading and writing in everyday activities.
7. Make a message board.
8. Encourage your child to "read."
9. Display your child's writing.
10. Make a bank or file of words your child likes to write.
11. Go to the library with your child.
12. Use television and technology wisely.

Helping Your Preschool Child Become a Reader

Did you know that the roots of reading and writing begin long before children enter school? The everyday experiences your child has in the early years—like talking about what he did today or dictating a caption for the picture she drew—are very important to later development in reading and writing. This booklet gives you many simple, enjoyable ideas for using these experiences to help your child get ready to read.

Discover how you can model important literacy habits for your child. Learn how reading stories, singing songs, and saying silly rhymes that your child loves all make your child aware of the sounds in words—an important skill in learning to read and write. And, find out how to make your home a showcase for reading and writing by providing inexpensive materials that encourage literacy and by showing your child the many ways reading and writing are used in everyday life.

By including a wide variety of language and print experiences in your family routines, you can prepare your child not only to be successful at reading and writing but also to enjoy them for a lifetime!

The High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, an independent, nonprofit organization, is internationally known as a center for research, curriculum development, professional training, public advocacy, and publishing. High/Scope's work centers on the learning and development of children from infancy through adolescence, with a special emphasis on the early childhood years. In a High/Scope program children learn through active involvement with people, materials, events, and ideas.

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HIGH/SCOPE® PRESS
a division of High/Scope Educational Research Foundation
600 North River Street, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198-2898
Orders: 800/40-PRESS; FAX 800/442-4FAX
www.highscope.org
49

ISBN 1-57379-126-1
90000
9 781573 791267

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

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